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## THE RECUPERATION OF AUTHENTIC OUTRAGE

NONPOLITICS BLACK BLOC, RADICAL POLITICS, REPRESSIVE TOLERANCE, RESISTANCE

*The victory of the Trump campaign, and the catapultic rise of the alt-right movement from the shadows of the internet into the mainstream political paradigm, has stimulated a mobilization of opposition, and an immediate call to action. However, the specter of performative activism and pseudo-outrage continues to blur the lines between genuine action and specious placation.*

As noted in *Internationale Situationniste* #9, the S.I. appropriately identified the neutralization of revolutionary strategies, concepts, and images, for the purpose of emptying them of their subversive content, thus making them compatible with mainstream, bourgeois culture. They formulated this process under the concept of recuperation. Media culture absorbs and diffuses radical ideas as a way to create a homogeneous plane of discourse, in which even the most mutinous of societal critiques are brought under the dominant space of acceptable discussion. In doing so, not only are the proponents of these revolutionary concepts forced to struggle for control over their own definitions, but the revolutionaries themselves are effectively dragged into the realm of their own repurposed concepts, in an attempt to retain coherency and an ideological relation to the general public. The S.I. go on to point out a few notable examples of this process of recuperation:

From Khrushchev to the priests, socialism as a concept has been given the richest variety of contradictory meanings ever consolidated in one single word. Unions have undergone such transformations that at this point the most effective strikes are those organized by the members of the privileged classes, as evidenced by the Belgian doctors this year. Not even anarchy has been spared, as one can tell from the “anarchist opinions” of the pro-Chinese Mr Siné and, even more so, by the anarchist opinions of *Le Monde libertaire*.<sup>1</sup>

Acting in accordance with capital's need to exert its dominion over nature, it also extends its domination over the domain of language, and over the realm of acceptable expressions of outrage. One needn't look any further than the outpouring of protests and demonstrations which have materialized over the past few weeks for an example of this subsumption of the limits of radical outrage, with millions participating across the globe in a show of solidarity to those affronted over the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump. Multiple sources have stated that the “Women's March” in particular, was the largest demonstration in

Washington DC's history, and while the ability to organize such a massive gathering of bodies is quite impressive, one must ask how effective this demonstration actually was at conveying its message. Moreover, what exactly is the praxis of these types of demonstrations, and why were the small glimpses of authentic outrage so universally condemned by the media, and similarly by the liberal stratum who made up the majority of the protest's population? To put it simply, liberal activism can be described as that of an empty signifier, that is to say, it acts as an imitation of the radical activism in which it seeks to replace. It creates a stage for the general public to try on the mask of the political radical, while at the same time allowing for the members of the privileged classes to direct this performance by redefining what radical action actually looks like. The political radical in the sphere of mainstream discourse is no longer the black bloc creating a cacophony of kindled police mobiles and broken windows. The political radical has been recodified as the football star who kneels during the national anthem, or the movie star who gives an apathetic, detached speech during an awards show. The political radical no longer sees action as an instrument to realize systematic change, action is reduced down to means with no end, where the demonstration is a statement and nothing more.

Herbert Marcuse discusses the disarming of political action in his essay "*Repressive Tolerance*:"

Thus, within a repressive society, even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game. To take a most controversial case: the exercise of political rights (such as voting, letter-writing to the press, to Senators, etc., protest-demonstrations with a priori renunciation of counter-violence) in a society of total administration serves to strengthen this administration by testifying to the existence of democratic liberties which, in reality, have changed their content and lost their effectiveness. In such a case, freedom (of opinion, of assembly, of speech) becomes an instrument for absolving servitude.<sup>2</sup>

What Marcuse sets out to illuminate in this analysis is not only the ineffectiveness of bourgeois activism to actualize systemic change, but also how this type of activism is metamorphosed into action which exculpates the oppressive class for their exploitation. Opposition via political activity reconciles itself with the status quo through its own existence. It contains itself within the limitations of the very system it seems to resist. "It is the people who tolerate the government, which in turn tolerates opposition *within the framework determined by the constituted authorities*." It is thus apparent that the dominant forms of activism represent not a subversive expression of dissent, but an implicit consent to be governed.

Engagement in activism constitutes an intervention within the space where politics and everyday life intersect. In this way it reflects the totalitarian nature of a democratic society, which controls the totality of life by appearing as the controlled object. In reality, of course, it is the individual whose life becomes co-opted by the machinery of the state through their own supposed participation in its process. This is the principal contradiction that the modern activist continuously and quixotically struggles to overcome. The politicization of human affairs is a component of the greater social phenomenon of alienation, as people act to strip themselves of autonomy through ritualized self-exploitation.

Politics function to a great extent on an abstract level, an intangible expression of the tangible violence of the state. It is a representational system, distorting images of the world by design. The public discourse that arises from this system is a reflection of a reflection, a second degree of non-reality. The rupture of this elaborate funhouse is seen through an act of physical violence, a refusal to engage in the maddening "dialogues" that form the basis of the mainstream consensus. With continued complacency, and an acceptance of this image of reality, that image becomes actualized. This series of relationships and social processes that constitute this spectacular construction becomes the manifestation of reality itself because it is understood that it *is the totality* of observable reality. The mystification of these spectacular aspects place them at the center of the social world. Guy Debord examined this phenomenon in his *Society of the Spectacle*:

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as instrument of unification. As a part of society it is specifically the sector which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation.<sup>3</sup>

We can see that this mask obstructs a clear view of the reality of society. The "politeness" of modern governance works to produce a societal consensus, one which inverts the truth of objective conditions by presenting helplessness as autonomy, coercion as accord. The maintenance of this phenomenological project is one of the most pressing issues of late capitalist modernity, as the intensification of crisis creates fissures in the objectified worldview.

It is this consensus which the activist, consciously or unconsciously, seeks to reproduce and perpetuate. Activism, as a by-product of capitalist democracy, is the art of manufacturing appearances. What is more important is to display anger, to compress it into a viewable form, rather than to actually act upon it. In the age of social media, this spectacular method can be virtualized and magnified, further diluting whatever emotional message was originally embedded. Activism is both an asocial and social affair, generating crowds that perform mechanistic demonstrations of indignation, brought together by an empty non-message. The deception of such crowds is that they are not so much crowds, but collections of individuals who are more focused on transmitting expressions of false personal investment to each other. The protester does not march towards any specific goal, but to engage in the act of marching itself. Expressive activism (protest politics) is the realization of the theater-form within our social world.

Consider the broken window, universally condemned as a product of “senseless violence”. Destroying a window attacks an ideological barrier as well as a physical one. The normative discourse of our society is one of simulated inaction, concealing brutality within pacifistic rhetoric. To subvert this false language and reveal its true nature is to speak the more “primitive” tongue of physicality. The burning limo and the smashed shopfront are not de-rationalized because they accomplish nothing, in fact the very opposite is true. They symbolize a death of passivity, posing an existential threat to the political mindset. This is why the puppets of the old order must denounce them as acts of insanity.

The limits of rational activity within a sphere of society are set according to the dominant narrative at play. For this reason, riots are depicted as the *wrong* way to dissent, that is to say, actualized resistance is an improper form of resistance. Violence is not *sophisticated*, they proclaim, the pen-is-mightier-than-the-sword and so on. Once again, this returns to the very simple contradiction of democratic governance, that of representation versus content. Such a system can only survive by embracing its own contradiction, pursuing violence with greater theatrical flair, the imposition of a terroristic peace. Activism is only an expression of helplessness in the face of this terrible force. The ideological constraints reproduced by the activist are a consequence of state power, and only reinforce it, despite appearances.. As such, political performance is an expression of the cyclical nature of society's administration. The perpetuation of the democratic ideology allows exploitative relations to produce the conditions for such an ideology to take root.

To point out the danger explicit violence poses to this system is not to say that the fracturing of a sheet of glass is such a momentous occasion. Breaking a window does not blow away the millions of police and soldiers and all their guns. Such an act does not practically undermine the state any more than a peaceful march does. Political violence faces the same problem that political debate does. The attempt to exert pressure and to force demands onto such a powerful entity is like screaming into a deaf ear.

It is violence as a form of action, in its movement beyond structure and symbolism, that threatens the present order. It bypasses the activist's struggle to overcome the contradiction of their own work, and lays bare the foundations of the capitalist state. Beyond the political, lies the potential for a reconstitution of the human, if only we can cease to reproduce the conditions of our own oppression. It is only when it tries to overcome the state, rather than shape it, that any sort of resistance transforms itself into revolution.

#### References

[1] “Words and Those Who Use Them” *Situationist International Online*. Web. 09 Feb. 2017.

[2] Marcuse, Herbert, and Wolff, Robert Paul. *Repressive Tolerance*. Berkeley, Calif.: Printed by the Berkeley Commune, 1968. Print.

[3] Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1977. Print.

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